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PARALLELS WITH THE PAST – How the Soviets Lost in Afghanistan, How the Americans are Losing

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On May 20, 2010, General Stanley McChrystal, then the American commander in Afghanistan, referred to the operation in Marjah, Helmand—an operation earlier touted as a potential turning point for U.S. Afghan counterinsurgency (COIN)—as a “bleeding ulcer.”¹ Immediately, we were reminded of a similar expression from an earlier Afghan War. On February 1986, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev speaking to the 27th General Congress of the Communist Party posited that the Soviet war in Afghanistan had become a “bleeding wound.” Was McChrystal’s comment just an unfortunate choice of words or a harbinger that the United States faced a Soviet-style disaster in Afghanistan?

This article assesses the startling and unsettling similarities between Soviet strategies and tactics in Afghanistan during their Afghan war of 1979-1989 and American coalition strategies and tactics in Afghanistan since October 2001. It concludes with the implications of this dynamic.² These similarities are extremely disturbing and, we believe, should be the focus of national attention and debate. While numerous significant similarities exist, this article will center on just three of the most important.

SOVIET AFGHAN INVASION

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Day of 1979 ostensibly to rescue a failing Communist government. The People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) had overthrown the Mohammad Daoud government in April 1978 and then engaged in bloody infighting and ambitious reforms that shocked Afghanistan’s largely rural and conservative population into rebellion. The Soviets brought with them, in December 1979, a new president for Afghanistan, Babrak Karmal, who they installed in the Presidential Palace as soon as they had killed Hafizullah Amin, the existing president. The rebellion quickly turned into a national resistance movement and the Soviets responded with sweep and clear tactics aimed at depopulating the countryside that was supporting and aiding the Afghan mujahedeen. By 1981, Afghanistan had the dubious distinction of producing the world’s largest single refugee population, most of whom fled to Pakistan or Iran. Pakistan also became the base for most of the fledgling mujahedeen, who were eventually aided by the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other countries aligned against the Soviet Union in the last great battle of the Cold War.

By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union was bogged down in Afghanistan even as a new generation of leadership was emerging in Moscow. The new Soviet leadership realized that time was running out on their Afghan adventure, and they made significant strategic adjustments to try to rescue what they could from what was shaping up to be a failure of epic proportions. First, they shifted their military strategy away from combating a rural insurgency to controlling the population centers and the road corridor that connected them. Second, they tried to change the unpopular puppet government they had installed and took measures to boost its popularity, primarily through a reconciliation program. Third, the Soviets concentrated on building a competent Afghan army and security forces to which they could hand off the job of Afghan security. It appears that the United

¹ Dion Nissenbaum, “McChrystal Lights Fire Under Marjah Commanders,” McClatchey Newspapers, May 25, 2010. Accessed at: <http://blogs.mcclatchydc.com/kabul/2010/05/mcchrystal-sounds-alarm-in-marjah.html> on May 27, 2010.

² One of us has also written on the similarities of the Afghan War with the Vietnam War: Thomas H. Johnson and W. Chris Mason, “Refighting the Last War: Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template,” *Military Review*, November-December, 2009, pp. 2-14.

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States is trying to do all of these things again today, as if the Soviet experience never happened.

Below we address the similarities in the Soviet and U.S. approaches to Afghanistan; the three similarities addressed are central to current U.S. and NATO Afghan strategies: the focus on key population centers, reconciliation, and the development of “Afghan” solutions to a variety of security concerns.

POPULATION-CENTRIC STRATEGY?

The vast majority of the Afghan population (75-80 percent) lives scattered across the countryside, from which all previous Afghan rebellions have originated. Soviet strategies initially focused on controlling the cities and key transportation routes, while launching search and destroy missions into the countryside in an effort to destroy insurgent sanctuaries and depopulate rural Afghanistan. The Geneva Accords of April 1988 that established a timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan prompted a switch to a strategy that kept most Soviet troops on relatively secure bases and/or in concentric circles around the larger towns and cities. In addition to garrisoned soldiers, some Soviet troops, as well as Afghan government forces, were used to hold the main “Ring Road” that connects Afghan urban areas. This urban population-centric strategy, in conjunction with a massive aid program, helped facilitate the Soviet withdrawal and also the continued (albeit temporary) maintenance of the Afghan Communists in power through control of the towns, cities, and main roads, while the mujahedeen operated relatively freely in the remaining 80 percent of Afghanistan – the Afghan rural hinterland. By fall 1991, nearly two and a half years after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal, Russian President Boris Yeltsin cut off supplies to Afghanistan. The Afghan Communist government fell apart almost immediately, although the mujahedeen did not take Kabul until April 1992.

Shortly after being named the new commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2009, General Stanley McChrystal asserted that the situation in Afghanistan required a new strategy that focused on the Afghan population. In practical terms, this new strategy would mean that U.S., NATO, and allied forces would concentrate their efforts on “key districts” that included a “meaningful proportion of the Afghan population” (that is, larger towns and cities), as well as the road network that connects them. The old “enemy-centric” strategy that produced multiple operations—multiple maneuver element search and destroy missions every year, often conducted in remote mountainous or rural areas by an individual country’s contingent of forces, would apparently be relegated to the past.

McChrystal’s focus on the key population centers, which for the most part has been continued by General David Petraeus who took over the command of U.S. and ISAF Forces from McChrystal in June 2010, is very similar to the ineffective city-centric strategy followed 25 years earlier by the Soviets. Like the mujahedeen a generation earlier, this is not where the Taliban primarily operate and when they do they are extremely difficult to identify or separate from the population. It is a military dictum that it is virtually impossible to defeat a rural insurgency in a largely agrarian country by securing the urban areas. The Soviets eventually learned this; apparently the United States has yet to do so.

UNPOPULAR GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTS RECONCILIATION PROGRAM

Despite the brutality of a Soviet war that cost the Afghans more than one million killed to about 15,000 Soviet dead, the Soviets and PDPA government pursued reconciliation programs during the 1980s, especially in northern Afghanistan where they attempted to promote common traditions and practices as a way to pacify various ethno-linguistic groups along the Afghan-Soviet Central Asian border. Cultural delegations to promote understanding between the Soviet occupiers and a variety of northern Afghan ethno-linguistic groups appeared frequently in the northern provinces, and the Soviets even tried to reconcile with local religious leaders through a restored “Society of Ulema” (Muslim legal scholars). In addition, the Soviets pursued programs that allowed traditional Afghan leaders (tribal elders and religious figures) to have some influence in government in exchange for loyalty to it via reconciliation.³ Finally, Soviet resources were used in an attempt to co-opt entire communities into the service of the government. The Soviets often enticed through the traditional system of patronage by providing a group with money and armaments in exchange for its support, either in the form of active operations against the resistance or simply keeping the area free of mujahedeen.⁴

After the Soviets replaced Babrak Karmal with Najibullah in 1986, Najibullah made significant reconciliation overtures to the mujahedeen until the early 1990s in an attempt to end the conflict. An Afghan National Reconciliation program was initiated that was based partly on a new constitution that provided for legislative institutions of government and did away with the single-party Revolutionary Council that had previously helped rule the country. The mujahedeen were even offered seats in the government, including control over key ministries, but only if they would reconcile and end the fighting; such offers were consistently rejected by the mujahedeen.

³ Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 179–182.

⁴ Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan: 1978-1992* (Georgetown University Press: Washington D.C., 2000), pp. 210–18.

Similarly, since early 2003, President Hamid Karzai has called for national reconciliation with the Taliban with the express purpose to reconcile warring parties in an attempt to bring peace to Afghanistan. Program Takhim-e Sohl (PTS)⁵ was established in 2005 and has been a keystone of Karzai's strategy, although at times some of his support for these programs appears to be little more than self-promoting propaganda, or even disinformation. Despite the reconciliation of a very few highly-placed Taliban and insurgent leaders early on in the program, meaningful reconciliation of influential Taliban has been minimal. And few Taliban foot soldiers have laid down their arms. Moreover, the highly touted peace assembly, or "Peace Jirga," of tribal elders and powerbrokers was held in May 2010 to systematically address reconciliation, but its success thus far has been more publicity than substance. Even Ambassador Karl Eikenberry has "warned that the money associated with reintegration risked 'creating perverse incentives, short-changing individuals and communities that have not fed the insurgency.'"⁶

Much of the failure of the reconciliation (as well as negotiation) policies are because the Taliban insurgency is best defined as an insurgency wrapped in the narrative of *jihad*. History would suggest that secular insurgents negotiate, *jihadists* do not. Rather, the Taliban that matter most within the movement are *jihadists* with perceived intense religious obligations (for instance, Mullah Omar, the *Amir ul-Momineen*, or Leader of the Faithful). "Peeling" such individuals away from the Taliban is virtually impossible because they believe they are following the mandates of a higher calling. Indeed, history suggests that no *jihad* has ever ended with a negotiated settlement or via reconciliation. Additionally, negotiation is not a tactic of the strong in Afghanistan, so when a government struggling with a resilient insurgency announces reconciliation and negotiation efforts as a centerpiece of its strategy, most Afghans figure the government is losing. Why would the Taliban, emboldened in the belief they are on the verge of victory (after all, the United States announced that it would begin to withdraw in July 2011), want to negotiate or reconcile? Nevertheless, the notion of political settlements and diplomatic negotiations is difficult for Washington to dismiss even when political and cultural realities make them unrealistic because such strategies are so ingrained in the American diplomatic psyche.⁷

"AFGHANIZATION"

By 1988 the central strategy of the Soviet Union was to withdraw its forces and turn the war over to the Afghan government. The success of this strategy depended on the strength and effectiveness of the Afghan security forces and their ability to maintain regime continuity and stability against the increasingly robust mujahedeen.

The Afghan security forces had been trained by Soviets and organized on the Soviet model since the 1950s. Thousands of Afghan military officers were trained by the Soviets. But after the Soviet invasion desertion rates soared, with as many as 55 percent of Afghan soldiers just melting away, leaving only 50,000 regular army troops to complement the Soviet force. Although the Soviets and PDPA waged an aggressive recruitment campaign to refill the ranks, mostly from peasant communities near large urban centers such as Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i Sharif,⁸ recruitment was only able to meet between 40 to 60 percent of its goals during the first five years of the Soviet occupation.⁹ Conscription never really achieved the levels the Soviets desired, although the Ministry of Defense (MoD) did reach a high of 160,000 in 1987. One way the Soviets bolstered the numbers of the regular army and Ministry of Defense was through recruitment into the Sarandoy, the heavily-armed special police of the Ministry of the Interior, which supplemented the KhAD (Afghan Secret Police). Later, after the Soviets withdrew, Najibullah "rented" various ethnic and local militias to augment the weak Afghan security forces. Nevertheless, none of these attempts were successful in creating an indigenous Afghan force that could realistically be expected to defeat the mujahedeen insurgents.

Like the Soviets, the United States and NATO have also found that building effective Afghan national security forces is fraught with problems. After the defeat of the Taliban regime in late 2001, and as part of the Bonn Accords, a Security Sector Reform program was planned, with a variety of countries taking the lead for different sectors of Afghanistan's security architecture. A Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Program (or DDR, led by Japan) was to rid the country of private militias, while building the Afghan National Army (ANA, United States lead) and Afghan National Police (ANP, initially Germany had the lead) were key to transforming Afghanistan's security provision back to the government. Initial plans were for the ANA to reach 70,000 by 2009, a goal that many thought too ambitious when by early 2003 the ANA numbered just over 1,700. By 2010, the Ministry of Defense was claiming to have more than 100,000 troops and had revised its planned total upwards to over 170,000. These numbers were critical because by late 2009, the United States had embraced a McChrystal (and later Petraeus) plan to "Afghanize" the war by increasing the size of Afghan National Security Forces

⁵ This reconciliation program has been variously known as the Peace Through Strength Program, Afghan Truth & Reconciliation Commission, National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), National Commission for Peace in Afghanistan, or simply the Afghan Reconciliation Program.

⁶ *The Diplomat*, April 8, 2011, <http://the-diplomat.com/author/david/>.

⁷ We would like to thank Chris Mason for suggesting this argument.

⁸ Antonio Giustozzi. *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan*, pp., 289. Map 1. "Main Areas of PDPA Recruitment Among Peasants, 1980-89."

⁹ *Ibid*, 264, Table 25. "Fulfillment of Recruitment Plans Nationwide and at the Provincial Level."

(ANSF), primarily the ANA and ANP, to over 400,000 within five years, including 240,000 ANA and 160,000 ANP (171,600 ANA and 104,000 ANP by October 2011).¹⁰ Many of these numbers have become a bone of contention. Paradoxically, at the same time we are trying to expand the quantity and quality of the ANA we are also attempting to use informal and static militias and various community defense forces much like the Soviets did with the Sarandoy and their “favorite” tribes and associated militias.

With the Afghan government's total annual revenue hovering around \$4 billion and the Obama administration's budget request for fiscal year 2012 of \$12.8 billion to train and equip Afghanistan's expanding army and national police force, it will be extremely difficult for Afghanistan to manage and sustain a force of that size and expense over the long term without protracted external financial and material support.¹¹ Although the United States has spent roughly \$18 billion since 2002 on the ANA, it is difficult to get accurate numbers on the actual size of the force “present for duty.”¹² The U.S. Defense Department when referring to ANA troop strength often uses the vague phrase of “trained and equipped” when reporting ANA numbers in press releases. This number does not equate to the number of ANA troops present for duty. It is estimated that one third of the ANA is now evaporating every year through desertions (18 percent) and non-reenlistment (60 percent). Interestingly, the Army's Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, had a statistician analyze ANA growth and attrition rates in 2005 and concluded that the ANA could never grow larger than 100,000 men, because at that point the annual attrition losses would equal the maximum number of new recruits entering the force each year.¹³ Moreover, as a recent study of the Afghan National Army (ANA) suggests, “[t]he push to build a unified national military in service of a civilian government has frequently clashed with the tendency to create militias in a bid to insulate the state from internal and external threats. The tension between these polar conceptions has had far reaching implications not only for internal security but also for Afghanistan's relationships with external actors.”¹⁴ The officer corps of the ANA that was developed after the Taliban's ouster, as suggested above, was largely composed of commanders from the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance (Shura-e Nazar-e Shamali).¹⁵ Mohammed Fahim, Karzai's initial Defense Minister, who led the Northern Alliance after the assassination of famous resistance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud (by al Qaeda agents on September 9, 2001), promoted his Panjshiri Tajik allies into officer positions in the ANA. For example, “Ninety of the first 100 generals appointed to the new army were from the Tajik dominated Panjshir Valley, reigniting ethnic, regional and political factionalism within the armed forces.”¹⁶ This same promotion dynamic was also recognized during the UN-backed Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program and led to “uneven disarmament... [with] units affiliated with the Northern Alliance often...the last to be demobilized,” which resulted in the targeting of non-Panjshiri units not allied with the Northern Alliance.¹⁷ While more Pashtuns have joined the officer corps since Rahim Wardak, an ethnic Pashtun, became Defense Minister in December 2004, the Tajiks still have officer numbers that do not reflect national population demographics. Similarly, the Afghan military during the Soviet occupation also reflected an out-of-proportion Tajik officer corps. The PDPA tended to select officers from their leftist allies that were highly concentrated in Tajik urban populations. Because of these dynamics and others, the probability of the successful “Afghanization” of the war effort must be questioned. This has been painfully evident recently with reports coming of sub-par performance by the ANSF units during the February 2010 Operation Moshtarak in Marjah. For example, USMC Officers embedded with the ANA during this operation have reported to us that 20-40 percent of ANA personnel in some field units failed urinalyses indicating the use of drugs, especially hashish. And this was only one of the soldiering problems evidenced by the deployed ANA.

OTHER SIMILARITIES

While these three similarities are most troubling because they involved dynamics that are central to current U.S. and NATO Afghan strategies, we have noted at least seven additional, important similarities that cannot be discussed in depth in this short article.¹⁸ Both interventions have:

1. Seen meddling powers with other interests than those of the occupying power.
2. Installed and backed a puppet government as part of the intervention.

¹⁰ Nordland, Rod. “U.S. Approves Training to Expand Afghan Army.” *New York Times*, 14 January 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/world/asia/15afghan.html? r=1> (accessed 12 April 2011).

¹¹ Thomas H. Johnson and Matthew DuPee, “Transition to nowhere: The limits of ‘Afghanization’,” *Foreign Policy*, March 22, 2011, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/22/transition_to_nowhere_the_limits_of_afghanization.

¹² The number of soldiers present for duty is the key statistic relative to the viability of the “Afghanization” of the war.

¹³ See Thomas H. Johnson and “Refighting the Last War: Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template,” with W. Chris Mason, *Military Review*, November-December, 2009, pp. 2-14.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, *A Force in Fragments: Reconstructing the Afghan National Army*, Asia Report No. 190, May 12, 2010, p. i.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid. p 10.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁸ We provide fuller treatment of these similarities in a longer and more in-depth article.

3. Attempted, through puppet governments, to significantly change Afghan society from the top down.
4. Used military tactics that emphasized kill/capture missions as well as battalion-size (or larger) operations to seek symmetrical fights with elusive guerrillas.
5. Featured different strategies for the north and south of Afghanistan, exacerbating the ethnic divisions from each region of the country.
6. Struggled to defeat the insurgents who have access to cross-border sanctuaries (or safe havens) in Pakistan.
7. Found the length, cost, and difficulty of their Afghan war corrosive to popular support, causing the war to become increasingly unpopular back home.

CONCLUSIONS

In its present form, current U.S. Afghan strategy holds little promise for success, especially if our assessment of the parallels with the past is accurate. As with all strategies, U.S. leaders must consider carefully the intensity and depth of American interests—that is, consideration of the *ends* must precede the *ways* and *means*.

Since 9/11, both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama have characterized defeating al Qaeda in Afghanistan as a vital national interest of the United States and have deployed increasing numbers of U.S. forces and spent more and more money to achieve that goal. Prior to 9/11, however, American relations with Afghanistan were lukewarm, at best. The United States did not step in after the post-World War II British disengagement from the Indian subcontinent to counter Soviet influence in Afghanistan. Instead, the United States aligned itself with Pakistan and Iran. In the 1980s, the United States did seize the opportunity presented by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to use the Afghan mujahedeen as a proxy force to bleed and ultimately defeat the Soviets there. However, the United States did not deploy its own forces and was quick to disengage from the region once the Soviets withdrew. Thus, until recently the United States did not appear to have vital interests in Afghanistan. Most of the al Qaeda organization that once existed in Afghanistan has been destroyed or relocated elsewhere, meaning that the stated interest for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is no longer relevant. Different reasons might now exist for the United States to view Afghanistan as a vital interest, especially the involvement of other major actors there in pursuit of often divergent interests.

Ultimately, however, no strategy might be as important as the Afghan societal and cultural factors that undercut it. Any Afghan strategy has five critical and interrelated pillars—security, governance, development, justice, and regional. Success overall requires success on all, and from the beginning of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan the strategy has been deficient in several areas.

First, security is not the key for Afghanistan, although insecurity undermines efforts on the other pillars. Rather, we see the center of gravity as government legitimacy. Historical analyses have suggested that success in a counterinsurgency (COIN) is largely proportional to the extent to which the regime is viewed as legitimate by the population. If the government is legitimate then the insurgency will likely not succeed, but counterinsurgency will fail on behalf of a government that its own people hold to be illegitimate. Indeed, the Counterinsurgency Field Manual of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps says, “Victory cannot be gained until the people accept the legitimacy of the government...”¹⁹ A government that is seen as legitimate by 85 to 90 percent of the population is the *sine qua non* of successful counterinsurgency.²⁰ It is extremely problematic that the vast majority of people in Afghanistan (and especially in regions outside of Kabul) today do not view as legitimate the national authority from Kabul, due in part to the allegations of rampant corruption associated with central government authorities.²¹ In numerous areas, especially in the rural Southern Pashtun hinterlands, the Taliban are not only doing a better job of governance and providing justice than Kabul, they are also seen as more legitimate than the distant and unpopular leadership in Kabul.

The legitimacy of Afghan governance has traditionally been derived from two sources: dynastic, usually in the form of monarchies and tribal patriarchies, or religious, and sometimes both.²² This problem of legitimacy is especially acute at the

¹⁹ COIN Manual

²⁰ Thomas H. Johnson and W. Chris Mason, “Refighting the Last War: Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template,” *Military Review*, November-December, 2009, pp. 2-14; Kalev I. Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review*, May-June 2005, pp. 8-12.

²¹ Holt, Ronald L. “Afghan Village Militia: A People Centric Strategy to Win,” Small Wars Journal.com, 2009.

²² For an excellent review of political legitimacy in Afghanistan, see: Thomas Barfield, “Problems of Establishing Legitimacy in Afghanistan,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, 2004, pp. 263-69, and; Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

local and village level of rural Pashtun society, for whom dynastic and religious authority has been paramount for millennia.²³ Just as the present Kabul government is having an extremely difficult time establishing legitimacy, so too did the Afghan government during the Soviet occupation struggle. The PDPA was never popular with the vast majority of the Afghan people and obviously could not derive any legitimacy from the sources suggested above.

Security cannot come from a strong foreign force on behalf of rulers that people view as corrupt, inefficient, and ineffective. Nor can it come from a domestic army led by those elites. Historically, the Afghan state could be predatory and extractive, as long as it was not intrusive or engaged in social engineering in the countryside. Even if the government has dynastic or religious sources of legitimacy, historically it still had to enter into a bargain with local elites in the countryside and provincial centers. Such bargains were lubricated with patronage, so that local elites could have power and dispense goods and services to their people, while simultaneously keeping the unpredictable Kabul government at bay. The system of government that was imposed on Afghanistan after 9/11 by the West and those Afghan elites who benefitted from it was highly centralized, although the initial economy of force counterterrorism military strategy meant that local warlords were allowed to persist as augmentation to the inadequate outside and national forces engaged in security provision. Also, while money has poured into the country for a multitude of reasons, there has been little success in connecting the economic largesse to the development of governmental legitimacy. In fact, just the opposite has occurred, whereby the new Afghan political elites at the central levels have enriched themselves so obscenely that the post-9/11 windfall has diminished rather than enhanced governmental legitimacy.

Likewise, there has been almost no meaningful effort to pursue justice, a concept at the core of Islamic notions of good governance, and especially critical in post-conflict societies. When so much blood has been spilled by so many people within a society for such a long period of time, some mechanism for transitional justice is needed to break the cycle of bloodshed, such as the famous “Truth and Reconciliation” approach of post-apartheid South Africa. The 2002 Emergency *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council) that cemented Karzai’s position as President illustrates this perfectly, and sadly, for Afghanistan. One author served as an International Monitor and Technical Advisor for Elections for that process. Weeks of hard and often dangerous work in the provinces by Afghans and international monitors alike occurred to sideline warlords, war criminals, drug dealers, and many other dangerous characters from playing a role in the leadership of the country. Yet, when the big meeting finally occurred in Kabul, all the dubious characters showed up and got credentials from the *Loya Jirga* Commission to participate anyway. Once they were inside the big tent they could throw their weight around and ensure a result they wanted. Justice was sacrificed on the altar of expediency, and has been repeatedly thereafter.

Finally, there is an important regional pillar to any successful strategy for Afghanistan. Four of the world’s most important powers (United States, China, India, and Russia) are engaged in Afghanistan now, as are Pakistan and Iran, as well as NATO. Regardless of what diplomats and politicians say, they do not all have similar interests, nor is it as simple as one set of powers against another set, as the alliances are shifting and multidimensional. Yet, Afghanistan’s ethnic groups straddle its borders with neighboring countries, meaning everyone has a proxy militia in Afghanistan if need be. Also, Afghanistan may possess substantial mineral wealth, meaning that it might be a prize for larger powers wanting what it has. And, Afghanistan has long been the “crossroads of Asia,” meaning that it is even a bigger prize because it holds the key to anywhere else in the region. For all of these reasons no strategy can be successful that does not take into account the way regional actors may act.

These are the realities of Afghanistan that shape the environment in which a strategy must be constructed and implemented. There is one additional factor of great consequence, which is that public opinion in the West no longer supports a long, expensive, and frustratingly uncertain war in Afghanistan. For NATO to continue to act out of area and the United States to stay long enough for all of the strategic initiatives to ripen will require a level of success that does not seem likely to occur.

Thus, there are probably three potential strategies left to us. They are:

- **Better Nation-Building through COIN** – This approach is predicated on a belief that only through nation-building can the root causes of Afghanistan’s problems be resolved. It essentially accepts that a heavy American presence is required to bring about enough good governance and development for success. However, U.S. and allied countries have found their support for a continued, expensive engagement declining, and the manifest corruption and ineffectiveness of the Afghan government does not instill confidence that this approach is working. Moreover, President Obama has already announced a July 2011 timetable for the beginning of an American withdrawal of combat forces.
- **Counterterrorism is Enough** – A counterterrorism approach does not accept the necessity of nation-building—or at least holds that such a commitment of means is not justified by the ends. Instead, adherents of this approach, increasingly in the ascendance in Washington, believe that the United States and its allies can achieve minimal national security goals through the relatively secretive activities of counterterrorism specialists. While such an approach may not resolve underlying problems and, indeed, might only be a variation of the containment strategy

²³ Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

that was employed against the Taliban in the 1990s, this is much more sustainable than the big COIN nation-building approach.

- **Declare Victory and Disengage** – It may be that the only strategy worth considering is one that abandons Afghanistan to its own fate. After all, the United States has already spent \$227 billion on Afghanistan (in direct military spending),²⁴ a country whose rapid GDP growth rates of the post-9/11 era have allowed it to get its national budget up to \$4 billion per year (almost entirely based on foreign aid). Also, the United States has achieved all of its initial objectives in Afghanistan, at least to some extent. If U.S. interests have changed and the ends now justify a greater deployment of forces and more expenditure of money, then such a case must be made with clarity and conviction.

We are reluctant to suggest complete abandonment, in part because other key countries are now engaged in Afghanistan in ways that threaten U.S. interests and partly because the earlier era of U.S. disengagement saw the advent of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and eventually 9/11. Moreover, there is an argument to be made that Afghanistan presents the United States with a remarkable opportunity for international leadership that, despite some difficulties along the way, is still not lost to us. However, we are not convinced that the United States should pursue the expensive and obvious strategy followed by the Soviets when it failed so miserably for them. That leaves us unenthusiastically in favor of using counterterrorism to achieve America's most pressing security interests in Afghanistan, with regional diplomatic and development efforts as critical enablers.

Afghanistan needs a good government that has legitimacy with its population, dispenses justice, spreads economic benefits, and lives peacefully with its neighbors as a hub of Asian trade. Perhaps it needs a constitutional monarchy with an appropriate role for the Ulema, as in other Islamic countries, and a reconstituted, empowered system of local governance. The projected mineral wealth and geostrategic location might very well provide the foundation for an economic miracle. And with proper investment in infrastructure and human capital, Afghanistan could be built into a functioning twenty-first-century country. But none of this will happen quickly and history suggests that economies built on extractive industries face their own unique problems. Moreover, these otherwise admirable goals cannot be provided by the United States or other outside powers, and the Soviet experience shows that staying too long in Afghanistan carries its own costs. Above all else, the Soviet experience shows us the painful mistakes of the past, and we ignore those mistakes at our peril. Otherwise, as George Santayana once warned us, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

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²⁴ Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terrorism Operations Since 9/11*. (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, September 28, 2009), p. 2.